

# Petzel

David Ebony, "Asger Jorn," *Art in America*, October 5, 2016.

## Art in America

# Asger Jorn

NEW YORK,  
at Petzel

by David Ebony



Asger Jorn: *Green Language*, 1962, oil on canvas, 23 $\frac{5}{8}$  by 28 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches; at Petzel.

The best-known works by Danish artist Asger Jorn (1914–1973) are eccentric, quasi-abstract paintings featuring wildly distorted faces, figures, and animals executed with feverish brushwork in acid colors. A founding member of the short-lived but greatly influential CoBrA movement, which was active from 1948 to 1951, Jorn created paintings epitomizing the existentialist angst of postwar Europe. Throughout his heyday, in the 1950s and '60s, his paintings deliberately countered the conventions of quality and good taste in Western art. He fought against capitalist interests in cultural institutions and resisted being co-opted by them, famously rejecting the prestigious Guggenheim Prize in 1964. In a letter to Harry Guggenheim, he wrote, "Go to hell with your money."

This compact overview of Jorn's endeavor contained more than twenty paintings and works on paper, plus a vitrine filled with publications, photos, and other documentary material. An early double-sided canvas set on a pedestal showed the artist's adaptations of modernist trends, especially Fauvism and German Expressionism. Both sides feature bold, all-over compositions. On one side is *Animaux animé(s)* (Animated Animals, 1944), a stylized landscape scene with patches of green punctuated by intentionally crude renderings of birds and other animal shapes outlined in blue. In the untitled image Jorn painted on the canvas's verso two years later, the animal forms are even more abstract and set against a nearly monochromatic pink ground.

The CoBrA group's name represents abbreviations for Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam, but, of course, was also meant to evoke a cobra snake. (The group used an image of the reptile as

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an emblem in their publications.) Like the other CoBrA artists, Jorn—the principal representative of Copenhagen—turned frequently to ancient art, folk art, Art Brut, and children’s art for inspiration. Aiming for a purity of expression, he developed a primal visual language in his mature works. *Drama i junglen* (Jungle Drama, 1952), for example, is a violent and visceral attack on the canvas. Two large heads, coarsely wrought with black and gray impasto, seem to grimace and scream in the aftermath of an explosion. The blackened earth and blood-red sky suggest a smoldering tumult.

Jorn was regarded as a pioneer of European *tachiste* painting and Art Informel, whose experiments bore similarities to those of Abstract Expressionism in the US but were generally more modest in scale and less lyrical in tone. Jorn’s work, however, transcends those styles and seems to presage later developments, like the Neo-Expressionism of Georg Baselitz and Julian Schnabel in the 1980s. Jorn almost always retained some form of figuration in his painting, but in a number of the most engaging pieces in this show his distortions are extreme. The convulsively rendered *Orientalische Feuer/Sanoyara* (Oriental Fire/Sanoyara, 1958), for instance, at first seems wholly abstract. Slathered brushstrokes of cobalt blue on the left and a thin red line meandering on the right together might suggest a head, but the allusion is ambiguous at best.

In his last years, as the symptoms of lung cancer began to overtake him, Jorn immersed himself in printmaking. Two large prints on view conveyed the same energetic, spontaneous image-making and vibrant tactility as his paintings. One of them, *Das Offene Versteck* (The Open Hiding Place, 1970), was a lithograph featuring a dense field of black and blue scribbles compressed in an indeterminate space. If you look hard enough, scrappy faces and figures emerge from the quagmire. The raucous tension that ensues between the abstract gestures and figurative elements activates the composition. The other print, one of Jorn’s last works, was the woodcut *Le Future du passé* (The Future of the Past, 1971). The image is uncharacteristically elegant, almost austere. A central figure in greenish gray, with white flourishes like feathers or scales, loosely resembles a bird at rest or a serpent with an open mouth—a cobra, perhaps, alluding to the group whose youthful energy helped launch Jorn’s career. Indeed, the evocative title of this image suggests a retrospective view, with Jorn assessing his own artistic development at the end of his life.

<http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/asger-jorn/>